Overland: Ian Turner Memorial Number (76/77), $4.

The latest double issue (No 76/77) of the Melbourne literary magazine, Overland, is devoted to commemorating the memory of Ian Turner who died while holidaying on Erith Island, Bass Strait, at the end of 1978. It also marks the 25th anniversary of Overland’s first publication.

The memorial issue contains several Turner pieces: the text of two lectures (“The Barassi Memorial Lecture”, a half-serious, half send-up, discussion of the nature of Australian football, especially in Melbourne, and “The Whitlam Years”), a radio interview on November 11, and some poems and letters. Also included are speeches and tributes by Stephen Murray-Smith, David Williamson, Manning Clark, Noel Counihan, David Martin, Russel Ward, Clyde Holding and several others; poems by Vincent Buckley, Max Harris and Dorothy Hewett; and an evaluation of Turner as an historian by Bob Gollan. Apart from Dorothy Hewett’s poem, it’s an all-male chorus — a pity because a female assessment would have been interesting and appropriate.

To somebody who knew Ian best as a communist student leader in the 1940s, it came as a bit of a surprise to find that the tributes had as their main element a recognition of his personal qualities — rather than his abilities of mind. But some praise him fulsomely as a thinker, writer and activist.

Ian Turner was undoubtedly a major figure in Australian intellectual life. Endowed with great natural gifts, he applied himself to developing his talents in several directions: as a fluent and compelling speaker, a brilliant writer and an inspiring organiser. At his best he had a rare personal quality which Russel Ward describes as an immense mana. “Such a person I had never met before and was never to meet again.” Ward refers to his tremendous mental energy and Manning Clark to his great charm.

As an historian, Bob Gollan establishes that Ian Turner’s major lasting achievement lies in the revised version of his Ph.D. thesis published as Industrial Labour and Politics in 1965. In his later years Ian turned his attention particularly to cultural studies. Although they produced no synthesis of the calibre of Industrial Labour and Politics, there is plenty of evidence that he was in Bob Gollan’s words “one of the truly creative intellectuals of our time”.

Russel Ward’s tribute is one of the few that attempts to assess Turner’s political ability and places him as potentially the greatest of all Australian political figures. This is high praise indeed, and rather difficult to discuss meaningfully. Turner was undoubtedly an outstanding public speaker, lecturer and advocate. In 1949 I saw him defend two radical students charged with disciplinary misdemeanours by a hostile Liberal Party-dominated Students’ Representative Council chaired by the late Ivor Greenwood. The trial dragged on for three long nights but we witnessed an exhibition of exceptional, unfailing advocacy. Ian Turner would have been a great courtroom figure. But what of his political qualities?

There was great political potential there. He spent his best years in the Communist Party, mainly in student politics and the anti-war and democratic cultural movements. (Cliff Green’s and Bert Vickers’ tributes give a taste of Ian’s work as the first manager of the Australasian Book Society.) He was expelled in 1958 for protesting at the execution of Imre Nagy, the Hungarian premier in 1956.

The special Overland includes a fascinating letter to W. J. (Bill) Brown written in 1956 at the height of the inner-party debate following the 20th Congress of the CPSU and following Brown’s public retreat from his earlier critical position. It shows Ian as a deeply committed communist. He wrote that while criticism was essential in a living, vigorous party, it often came to be “only criticism of the means of fulfilling an already decided policy”. What was most important was that it should not become “a substitute for serious discussion of basic questions of our policy and our theory … we’ve all got a stake in our party and the sort of future it’s trying to build in Australia”.

Overland naturally stresses his achievements in his later political life in the Labor Party and in cultural politics. In the last decade of his life his explicit political position in the Labor Party and his alleged shortcomings as a marxist came under strong attack. (The marxist journal Intervention No 12, April 1979, carried his slightly over-generous but still remarkably balanced and articulate reply.)
His socialism became strongly linked to the need to uphold liberal values, which some of his critics regarded as a "cop-out". But as the letter to Bill Brown shows clearly his opposition to illiberal and authoritarian socialism goes back to the lessons of 1956, and before. Most probably he was following a tactical line he worked out in 1961 in a study of the Victorian Socialist Party, 1900-1920.

After his university days, Ian Turner's political potential did not find fertile ground in which to take root. The reasons were partly personal, but the most significant reason, almost certainly, lay in the times being out of joint and the disjunction between the working class and the intelligentsia, identified by Jack Blake in his book, The Revolution from Within, as a crucial element of stalinism. In Australia, national conditions accentuated these difficulties.

Thus Ian Turner failed to realise fully his possibilities as a political figure. However, his life and activity have been of great political significance, and we all owe him a great debt.

Roger Coates